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By
Kunal Mukherjee



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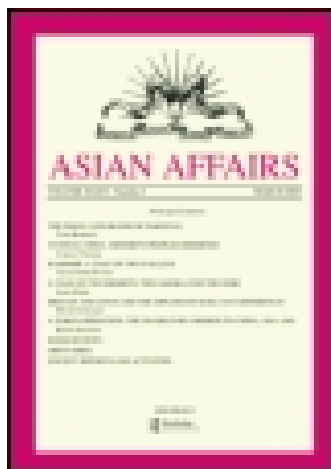
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WHY HAS DEMOCRACY BEEN LESS SUCCESSFUL IN PAKISTAN THAN IN INDIA?

KUNAL MUKHERJEE

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Introduction

From Partition to the present day, India has displayed an ability to sustain democratic forms of government and politics. There have been no military bids for power and even Mrs. Gandhi's months of emergency rule, which many thought perilously close to a dictatorship, was ended by the electors' verdict in 1977.¹ Despite phases of acute domestic strain and communal violence, the assassination of two prime ministers and a number of armed conflicts and territorial disputes with her neighbours, India remains a flourishing democracy and a stable independent regional power.

By contrast, Pakistan has a history marked by repeated military dictatorships: the generals have ruled the country for more than half the time since Partition. Why such different outcomes in countries which apparently share a common British colonial legacy of democracy, the rule of law, a functioning administrative system and the English language (not to mention cricket)? Why the contrasting political trajectories? It might be noted in passing that Bangladesh, the former East Pakistan, has also had its full share of military coups since Independence. The reasons for those coups are outside the scope of this article, which will attempt to identify the factors which have hindered the rise of democracy in Pakistan. It argues that Pakistan's crisis of democracy is the result of a complex combination of factors, both historical and contemporary.

Definition

Of course, "democracy" is not a concept which lends itself to hard and fast definition. One only needs to consider the regional context: most political systems in South and South-East Asia are variously described as "ambiguous" or "mixed" or "pseudo-democratic" regimes, meaning that they are not fully democratic and not fully authoritarian, but rather somewhere in between, sometimes even oscillating from one extreme to another.² In terms of a working definition we need to go beyond the *simpliste* slogan of "free and fair elections" An acceptable definition might be that put forward by Schumpeter

who suggested that democracy meant a political method, an institutional arrangement for arriving at political, legislative and administrative decisions by vesting in certain individuals the power to decide on all matters as a consequence of their successful pursuit of the people's vote.³ Schumpeter saw the essence of a democracy as the ability of citizens to replace one government by another and hence to protect themselves from the risk of political decision-makers transforming themselves into an immovable force.⁴ As long as governments can be changed and as long as the electorate has a choice between broadly different party platforms, the threat of tyranny can be resisted.⁵

Historical factors

In examining Pakistan's somewhat checkered relationship with democracy, it is important not to lose sight of the circumstances under which the country came into being: Pakistan was not a democratic dream, but a Muslim aspiration, based on a political reality. It was established as an independent country as a result of a political movement of Muslims in South Asia, but those Muslims were not politically organized. Though the Muslim League was founded in 1906, for many years Muslims in South Asia were behind the Hindus in terms of a larger idea of a national territory, of planning, of organization, of locating and recruiting expert personnel.⁶ Congress did not start out reflecting mainly Hindu perspectives. It had key Muslim participants and the Khalifat movement (in support of Ottoman Turkey during the Great War) saw Gandhi courting Muslim support for independence. But from the 1920s Gandhi gradually became a major symbol of Hindu culture and religion.⁷ By contrast, it was not until the mid-1930s that Jinnah emerged to galvanize a Muslim League that had hitherto been a much smaller and less popularly-based organization. Over the same period, while Hindus produced a number of all-India level leaders, the Muslims, while having a number of first rate provincial leaders had few national level politicians.⁸

It was the sense of imbalance and unease generated by comparison with the Hindus that helped strengthen the Muslim sense of separateness. Muslim sensitivities as displaced rulers added to their unease at the rise of Congress and faced with the likelihood of a Hindu *raj* in any constitutional scheme based on majoritarianism, Muslim leaders increasingly insisted on the need for different constitutional arrangements, arguing that for as long as Muslims remained a minority, they could not expect anything more than a marginal role in wielding power in an independent India. The slogan "Islam is in danger" was a useful rallying cry against the prospect of a Hindu-dominated centre and during the years of political turmoil, cultural nationalism merged with religious fundamentalism. In 1930, Mohammed Iqbal, the renowned poet and philosopher, had asked the All-India Muslim League's Council to endorse the call for the creation of a Muslim state in the north west of India including Punjab, Sindh, North West Frontier Provinces (NWFP) and Baluchistan. Iqbal's idea of Pakistan was not based on a European model of a nation state but on the

belief that political power was essential to the higher ends of establishing God's law.⁹ Like many of his co-religionists, including those who set the stage for today's Islamic parties, Iqbal saw territorial nationalism as a step toward a larger Islamic community.¹⁰ And although Iqbal's ideas were initially ignored by most Muslim politicians they gained in strength in the informal arenas of politics through the medium of the popular press, so much so that in 1933 his ideas inspired Chaudhuri Rahmat Ali, a student at Cambridge, to invent the word, "Pakistan", meaning "The Land of the Pure".¹¹ It was primarily Sir Sayid Ahmed Khan, Mohammed Ali Jinnah, and Mohammed Iqbal, who played the instrumental role in giving shape to the idea of "Pakistan",¹² but we should not forget that the leadership were far from united nor that the idea of Pakistan meant all things to all people. A number of leaders, like Maulana Azad, Khan Abdul Gaffar Khan and Rafi Ahmed Qidwai were actually against Muslim separatism/nationalism and partition. (Indeed, many Muslims were to remain in India at Partition, preferring the vision of a secular democratic state to that of a Muslim "Homeland").

In March 1940, without specifying any exact geographical boundaries, the All India Muslim League at its annual session in Lahore formally demanded independent Muslim states in the North West and North East of India on the grounds that Indian Muslims were a nation.¹³ Subsequent history suggests that the League's claim was exaggerated. Indian Muslims turned out not to be a nation. Indeed, given the tremendous linguistic and regional diversity within the Muslims of South Asia, it was to prove almost impossible for the leadership of Pakistan to adequately address the needs and interests of each and every one of the various Muslim populations, inevitably leaving some groups feeling that their needs were being ignored. The fact is that, apart from a broad Muslim identity, the inhabitants of the former East Pakistan, or Bengalis, did not have a lot in common with the inhabitants of West Pakistan, in terms of both the form of Islam they practiced and the language they spoke. Bengali Islam is a syncretic cultural system that fuses Hindu Bengali traditions with Islam, which is very different from the West Pakistani varieties of Islam. Linguistically, it was the same story. Bengali Muslims spoke the same language as Bengali Hindus but mostly could not communicate with West Pakistanis, whose linguistic links were with Punjabis and other language groups from north India.

Different inheritances at partition

The concept of the centre, or more precisely, the differential inheritances of India and Pakistan is critical in understanding the contexts in which state formation proceeded in the two countries.¹⁴ The fact that the Indian Congress party inherited the colonial state's unitary centre and was able to assume British India's international personality gave it a good head start.¹⁵ Most of the British structures, especially in administration and education, were left on the Indian side, which allowed Indian politicians after independence to

expand an already existing central state apparatus, developing the structures left by the British in what were the Bengal, Madras and Bombay Presidencies and the United Provinces. Many of these had been under British administration for far longer than the equivalent areas in Pakistan, whose new national territory included the tribal areas where the British writ had never run at all. By contrast, cast in the role of a "seceding state" and with Muslim provincial particularisms providing a major driving force for its creation, Pakistan had to confirm its independent existence by creating a viable central authority over territories which, apart from being separated by over a thousand miles of Indian territory, had until 1947 been governed from New Delhi.¹⁶ Since India inherited almost all the major urban centres which provided the roots of much of civil society under British rule, politicians in Pakistan had to start from scratch. They had no capital city, no existing national-level administration, and no ministry buildings. They only had the existing provincial-level structures e.g. in Sindh. It may not be irrelevant that the only national-level administrative units transferred intact to Pakistan in working order were those battalions and squadrons of the old British Indian army which were to form the new Pakistani army. In these circumstances it is perhaps not surprising that it took some time for the Pakistani establishment to build an infrastructure.

But while the contrast between a pre-existing and a non-existing central state apparatus is an important point of reference in assessing the roles of the Congress and the Muslim League in shaping political processes in India and Pakistan during the initial years of independence, other economic and strategic inequalities were inherent in partition. In terms of territory, India got a rather better deal in the shape of the fertile Indo-Gangetic plain which is very suitable for agricultural cultivation. The soil of the Deccan which is well suited for cotton cultivation helped India to expand its economy whereas Pakistan inherited a mountainous region in the North and North West and a desert in the South and Centre both of which obviously make agricultural cultivation quite difficult. To the extent that this harsh geography has made it harder to develop the economy, it could be argued that this had a knock-on effect on Pakistan's polity because the lack of economic development rendered more difficult the development of the strong middle class which might have pushed for political reform and pluralism.

The strategic legacy was also asymmetric. In the frontier areas that came to constitute most of Pakistan, the military, even under British rule, played the key role in local governance and civil institutions were correspondingly weak. This provides key historical context to the involvement of the army in the Pakistan state almost from independence. But there was another imperative: the immediate military dispute over Kashmir was a serious problem for India, but a survival issue for the Pakistani state, causing an anti-democratic feed-back into domestic politics. As state survival became Pakistan's primary concern, the military assumed a role of more than average importance, asserting its centrality in matters of governance and politics in the face of weak political leadership. In the face of the rivalry with India it also became urgent for the Pakistani political

elite to assert central authority over the provinces, thus depriving the system of much of the elasticity needed to give expression to the manifest differences between the various elements that had come together to make Pakistan.

Managing diversity

Both countries faced the major challenge of creating a framework within which regional and class differences could be accommodated and disputes over resources resolved. Indian politicians, with potentially more diversity to accommodate, were more successful in finding ways to contain the various centrifugal forces in their society. India for centuries has been a caste-based society, highly fragmented along caste lines. Although there has always been room for social mobility, India's social stratifications played, and play, a crucial role in dividing the country. However, it could be argued that democratization has tended to reduce India's social inequalities and thus democracy as a concept became more meaningful for the lowly masses. The long-term spread of anti-caste ideologies, the competitive political mobilization of the lower castes, firstly by the Congress and then by other parties, the extensive use of "reservation policies" for the so-called backward groups and India's affirmative action policies that have created quotas for both middle and lower castes in politics, education and the bureaucracy, have all helped the masses to strengthen their sense of oneness with India, with the political elite and with the political concepts which these elites stand for. The demands of the lower caste groups have often been satisfied by the inclusion of caste leaders into visible positions of power and this reflects the way in which the Congress Party has successfully acted as a "broad church", incorporating rival elites into its loosely knit organization. Potentially difficult conflicts with, and between, regional elites were successfully contained by crafting a federal system, acceptable to all, that had a historical basis that recognized linguistic communities as legitimate political components and as a result gave considerable political power to Indians who speak different regional languages. The federal structure was further strengthened when the demands of one region or another were partly accommodated rather than flagrantly resisted. The Indian system also has a safety-net in terms of "President's rule" which provide a mechanism to cope with a breakdown at the state, or regional, level.

The opposite happened in Pakistan. Security considerations led the elite to restrict regional autonomy. As the historian, Ayesha Jalal, has argued in her *Democracy and Authoritarianism in South Asia*, Pakistan's constitutional framework was federal in form but unitary in substance. The centre had all the necessary powers: legislative, administrative and financial to overwhelm the quantum of autonomy granted to the provinces. Crucially, although East Pakistan generated the lion's share of the country's export earnings and had a larger population, yet West Pakistan provided most of the political and military leadership. The increasingly colonial attitude of these leaders resulted in a steadily rising tide of Bengali nationalism. In these circumstances, clumsy attempts

to introduce Punjabi as the national language of Pakistan were hardly likely to improve the East's sense of common identity with a distant West Pakistan. The secessionist movement in the East was brought to the boil in the aftermath of the first genuinely democratic national elections since independence, held in 1970, when the attitude of political leaders from West Pakistan was manifestly non-democratic. They refused to accept that the landslide majority won by the Awami League in East Pakistan gave it an overall majority in Pakistan as a whole and thus the right to rule the country. Instead the then president, General Yahya Khan, made an ill-judged and ultimately disastrous attempt to impose rule by force, inadvertently paving the way for separation. But the problem remains, albeit now within the reduced territory of what is now Pakistan. It has not proved possible to establish and nurture national political parties which can command allegiance from all over the country. Even the best-known party, the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), is seen by many as essentially a Sindh-based party. And there is no safety-valve. Generals' rule is not the same as President's rule.

The years after independence

The success of formal democracy in India is generally attributed to the organizational strengths of the Congress and the political skill of its leaders. After Independence, the Indian Congress party quickly moved to a dominant position in Indian politics. Institutions and practices of democracy found considerable acceptance during the first phase of post-Independence politics which was dominated by Nehru virtually up to his death in 1964. No one really challenged Nehru's preeminence in the Parliament. Even when his policy failed to prevent the war with China in 1962 and ended in a humiliating defeat for India, he did not lose political stature or his office.¹⁷ Compare the situation in Pakistan. The Muslim League, which had served as the vanguard of the freedom struggle, utterly failed to transform itself from a nationalist movement to a national party which could serve as an effective political machine for aggregating national interests and identities into a plural and participatory national framework.¹⁸ In this context, the early death of Jinnah not only removed the one man in Pakistan who might have emulated Nehru, but also struck a severe blow to the prospects for democracy in Pakistan, precisely because there were few other leaders of stature and even fewer who were inspired by the vision of Pakistan as a **democratic** Muslim state. Indeed, most of those who assumed leadership in the Muslim League and rose to power in the newly independent country had no real attachment to the norms of democracy.¹⁹ The leadership typically came from the geographical areas that subsequently became part of Pakistan and was composed of wealthy and powerful landlords and feudal tribal leaders of those areas whose interests lay in maintaining the status quo. In India, landlordism, or the *zamindari* system, was abolished soon after independence, thus ending the poor's dependence on the *zamindars*, but the situation in Pakistan was quite the opposite. The persistence of feudal

culture throughout Pakistan after independence has helped non-democratic forces to flex their muscles and exert influence in party-politics, posing a formidable threat to political pluralism in Pakistan.

As a result, for the first decade after its creation, Pakistan struggled with the challenge of democracy. The Muslim League disintegrated, a victim of personal and provincial rivalries, and the federal structure increasingly failed to reflect the realities of power. Whereas India devised its post-colonial republican constitution by 1950, it was 1956 before Pakistan reached a similar stage. And once Iskander Mirza became president in March 1956, he manipulated party positions and tried every permutation and combination to create situations under which as many as four ministries fell like pins, the most short-lived being the one headed by Chundrigar which lasted barely seven weeks.²⁰ Mirza knew that in the event of general party elections, scheduled for the spring of 1959, party positions in the next parliament would change in a manner such that he could not hope to get re-elected as president. He therefore decided to abrogate the constitution, dissolve the ministries and assemblies, abolish political parties and impose martial law.²¹ Ayub Khan became military dictator from 1958 to 1968. He has been criticized by historians for using Islam as a veneer to protect vested interests and justify authoritarian rule. In the face of pro-democracy agitation he was replaced by another general, Yahya Khan, who presided over the dismemberment of Pakistan in the wake of the disastrous elections of 1970, the first elections to be held on the basis of universal adult franchise since independence, more than 20 years before. (Pakistan's difficulty in instituting even a formal democracy with regular elections at the national and provincial levels gives a rather different slant on the durability of the British colonial legacy in South Asia).

Following the split between the two parts of the country, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto emerged with a true democratic mandate. Yet he was also a believer in the concept of absolute power and was determined to use his position as a vehicle to achieve that goal. On assuming office, he began to move swiftly to consolidate his power base which was built henceforth around the bureaucratic machine rather than the willing support of the people.²² Bhutto began to rely more and more on the traditional tools of power and became less dependent on public support for the implementation of his policies and actions and for those who dared oppose him in the heyday of his power, he had nothing but contempt.²³ The final outcome of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's period in office was another military coup, under General Zia, crucially a former refugee from the Indian side of the divide, who also sought political legitimacy for his non-democratic rule by embracing Islam, the original justification for the establishment of the state.

External influences

There are also external factors to consider. The Kashmir problem and relations with India have loomed large since Independence. The withdrawing British

were faced with the disturbing prospect of two Dominions fighting each other, with all that that meant for intra-Commonwealth relations and the necessity to avoid supporting one successor state more than another, which helped perpetuate this dangerous legacy from the outset. As a result, during the Cold War, Pakistan saw membership of the South-East Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO) as an insurance policy against India, while the US saw Pakistani membership of SEATO as a proof of commitment to an alliance against Communism. It is important to note that the US establishment has always found it easier to deal with a military general than to get involved in messy local politics, but the point is not so much that the US always supports generals, but rather that US support for democracy in Pakistan has come second to broader geopolitical considerations, thus enabling the generals to secure substantial external backing. Thus at a much earlier time, the US supported General Ayub Khan so that it would have an ally in the region to help check the spread of communism, whose two main protagonists were China and Russia, India's patron and ally.²⁴ The US also fully backed General Zia-ul-Haq with respect to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and Pakistan's support of the Afghan resistance, and, more recently, in declaring its attack on Afghanistan in October 2001 as part of the "war against terrorism" the US enlisted the support of General Pervez Musharaff as a "close ally" in this war. And interestingly, for those same broader geo-political reasons, successive civilian rulers have not enjoyed any particular favour with Washington. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, despite his secularist thinking, was not in America's good books because he started a nuclear program. Then the US imposed crushing sanctions against Pakistan throughout the period of civilian rule from the late 1980's to the late 1990's, ironically, the whole decade when Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif were the elected leaders of their country.²⁵ And it is an unfortunate truth that civilian Pakistani politicians have not managed to use the interludes between periods of military rule to establish a tradition of civilian government. It must be admitted that Pakistan's civilian politicians have often acted, in their own interests, as arbitrarily as the military, with more corruption and less concept of real democracy and national unity. At all events, the hold of the bureaucracy and the military over power has prevented the proper decentralization of authority.²⁶ Successive governments have too often allowed parliament to simply rubber stamp the military's decisions and initiatives, spending billions on the military, whilst neglecting the basic needs of the people for justice, health, education, security and hope.

The Islamist factor

As already noted, in spite of their apparently identical common colonial legacy, the two countries did not start with the same stated objective or aspiration. The founding fathers of the Indian constitution made it very clear in the preamble that the people of India have "solemnly resolved to constitute India into a sovereign, socialist, democratic republic"²⁷, whereas the Pakistani constitution

spells out that all existing laws shall be brought in conformity with the injunctions of Islam as laid down in the Holy Koran and Sunnah and no law shall be enacted which is repugnant to such injunctions.²⁸

It is the logical consequence of establishing a separate state for Muslims, that many would argue that Islam, not democracy, should be the over-riding principle of state construction. Thus, whilst many Pakistani political leaders were not pro-Islamist, few could resist the temptation of appealing to Islam since this was the only course open for leaders who discouraged mass politics, failed to adopt meaningful political platforms and avoided elections. In the words of one observer, an “Islamic State” became the political motto to be used by non-democratic Muslim leaders to continue indefinitely their predominant position in Pakistani politics.²⁹ Since the formation of the state of Pakistan, the society has been ideologically divided into two loosely defined groups: fundamentalists/Islamists and the modernists.³⁰

But even many of the modernists have made their proposals in an Islamic framework. This has been primarily because, with an essentially fragmented electorate, Pakistan’s leaders cannot afford to lose the support of the Islamists who form one of the main ideological camps in the country and thus one of the main reliable voting blocs. Sunni fundamentalists have also tried to exploit their alliance with politicians to increase their own participation in important institutions like the government, the schools and the media and this too could have had an impact on democracy in Pakistan. Islamists are in favour of the concept of *hakimiyya* which refers to God’s sovereignty. This does not allow much room for participatory politics or people’s sovereignty because Allah is seen as the only one who is sovereign and it is only Allah who should rule.³¹ At the core of the arguments presented by those who advocate the rule of a single spiritual leader is the view that democracy fails humanity and its needs: the only political system that is compatible with Islam is one where God is the sole legislator.³² Islamists do not accept a government that places human beings at the core of the legislature and since for some Muslims, God is the sole legislator and the faithful necessarily submit to the will of God, it follows that an Islamic government has no need for a democratic process.³³ In the words of Benazir Bhutto, “the alliance between elements of Pakistan’s military and religious parties began before the Zia years (in the seventies and eighties) but reached its zenith under his dictatorship” and she recalls being called an infidel or *kafir* by Mawdudi’s party, the Jamat-I-Islami, when she ran for the prime ministership in 1988.³⁴ During the age of Zia, thousands of political workers, labourers, journalists, women and workers were imprisoned, lashed, tortured and maimed. Civil liberties were snatched away, press freedom was done away with and every voice of dissent was silenced – all in the name of Islam.³⁵

Conclusions

It is quite clear that in terms of Schumpeter’s definition of democracy Pakistan has had a checkered record for a whole set of complex historical and

contemporary factors: ambivalence over the Pakistan project from the outset, failure of the post colonial civil institutions, Kashmir and the role of India. But whilst it is fascinating to examine the record, the real question is how to draw on the historical analysis to ensure a better future for the people of Pakistan? There are four key conclusions:

Firstly, history shows that in the first half of the 20th century Muslims in South Asia were not adequately organized politically. Thus for the future, the crucial importance of better political organization needs to be recognized.

Secondly, we saw how most of the British administrative structures fell on the Indian side, thus providing a framework which helped India to become the world's largest democracy. Now of course, Pakistan has made progress in building its own infrastructure which should enable democratic forces to consolidate. But this is dependent on economic expansion which would promote the rise of a strong middle class with expectations of greater political reforms and transparency.

Thirdly, the Pakistani military has always argued that it has a central role to play in the state because of the ongoing Kashmir issue. For democracy to flourish, the role played by the army in governance and politics needs to be reduced. So it is vital to reach some sort of an arrangement with India over the Kashmir issue. While much depends on India being more magnanimous, Pakistani politicians need to be fully committed to carrying forward a peace process with India. The quicker the better for democracy in Pakistan.

Fourthly, there is the problem of US influence. In the past, during the Cold War, the US supported the generals in the context of containing the spread of communism. The same phenomenon recurred in the more contemporary context of fighting the "war against terror". The US needs to change its approach. Instead of supporting "feudal" or military elements it needs to consistently encourage democratic elements to come forward and play a more important role in Pakistani politics. But perhaps even more important, the US needs to simply back off and give the democrats the space to take things forward without constantly being branded as friends of the West, with all the domestic political cost which that can entail. For only Pakistani politicians can cope with the rise of those Islamist elements in politics which do not necessarily favor a system in keeping with Western understandings of participatory democracy and it is undeniable that a wider revived international Islam is playing an increasing role in Pakistan.

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